

BEET

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

Overview

The beet, *Beta vulgaris*, is a cool season vegetable of the goosefoot family and is closely related to Swiss chard. Both the top and root of the beet are edible. The maroon-colored beet sap stains and is difficult to remove from skin and clothing. Russian women actually applied beet juice to their cheeks for rouge. It is rich in vitamin A.

Choosing Varieties

There are many varieties of beets available that differ in days till maturity, color, and shape, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Mid-west states are:

- Beet Golden Globe (yellow root)
- Bull's Blood (red tops)
- Chioggia (red and white bull's eye pattern)
- Early Wonder Tall Top (flattened root)
- Red Ace (tolerant of warm weather)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

The beet is a cool season vegetable that can withstand a light frost. It can be spring or fall planted.

In Missouri, seeds can be sown in mid-March to early April in the spring or in late summer, typically early August. They should be planted no more than ½ inch deep in rows that are about 18 inches apart.

The beets will need to be thinned because beet “seeds” are actually a dried fruit that contains at least two tiny seeds. Once the plants are 3-4 inches tall, they should be thinned for a final spacing of about 3 inches. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet. If beets are not thinned, root formation is often inhibited. To extend the harvest season plant at 20-day intervals.

For beets planted as a fall crop, poor or uneven germination can result from the soil forming a crust after a heavy rain, especially if the topsoil contains clay. Crusting creates a



barrier to emerging seedlings. This can be prevented by not planting seeds too deeply and by mulching the row with sawdust, pine needles, or grass clippings.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Beet seeds should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. To aid in uniform root formation, clay soils should be amended with compost or sand.

To prevent weeds, retain moisture, and to keep soil temperatures down, mulch can be applied around the plants. Beet plants should be given enough water to prevent wilting without waterlogging the soil. Beets that develop during dry weather are often tough and woody.

Flea beetles are pests to beets by eating holes in the young leaves, slowing growth. Leaf miners can also create considerable damage to beet greens by eating winding paths inside the leaf. Flea beetles and leaf miners can be controlled with chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin (be sure to follow product labels).

Harvesting

The greens can be harvested when they are about 6 inches high and can be used like spinach. Roots can be harvested when they reach the size of a golf ball. If left to grow beyond 3 inches, they can become woody and inedible.

Seed Sources

Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Johnny's Selected Seeds (1-877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com) and Burpee Seeds (1-800-888-1447, burpee.com) are two companies that sell beet varieties.

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